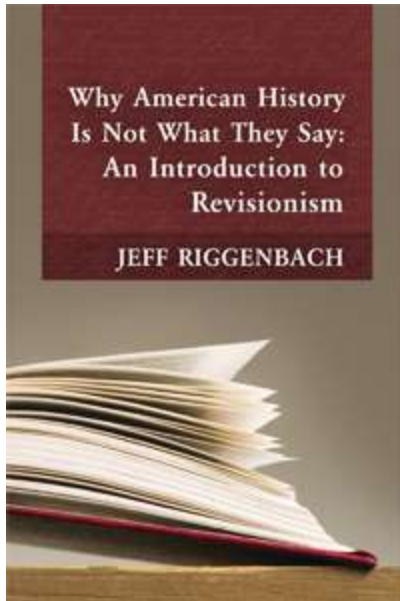


Why American History Is Not What They Say: An Introduction to Revisionism

A Review

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by Jeff Riggenbach, Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn, AL, 2009. 210pp. Indexed.



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Jeff Riggenbach's interesting and informative new book is an introduction to revisionism, but it is an unusual one. For one thing, the book does not confine itself to foreign policy and war as subject matter, but also presents a kind of revisionist history of American politics from Riggenbach's libertarian point of view. Riggenbach is a longtime libertarian.

For another thing, the book reflects Riggenbach's long-standing interest in literature. Thus, Riggenbach leads the reader to the subject of scholarly revisionist historical writing via a discussion of historical novels, including novels by Kenneth Roberts, John Dos Passos, and especially Gore Vidal. (He devotes an entire chapter to the latter.) After citing various revisionist views expressed in Vidal's "American Chronicle" series of six novels, Riggenbach asks if there is any scholarly foundation for such views. He says there is, in the revisionist writings of Harry Elmer Barnes, Charles Beard, William Appleman Williams, Gar Alperovitz, and Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, among others. And he shows that this is true in several cases, including the Civil War, the World Wars, and the Cold War. (However, I don't know if any of the revisionist writers cited by Riggenbach have corroborated *all* the "revisionist" claims about Thomas Jefferson expressed in Vidal's novel *Burr*. Thus, for example, Riggenbach does not quote any revisionist scholar supporting the Sally Hemings accusation.)

As I've said, Riggenbach's book is an *introduction* to revisionism. It is not an exhaustive or greatly detailed study of revisionism, except for his rather detailed revisionist history of American politics.

In Chapter Three, "The Story of American Revisionism," Ruggenbach focuses on three movements--the New History/Progressive History movement (Harry Elmer Barnes and Charles Beard), the so-called New Left historians (William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, Gar Alperovitz, et al.), and the Libertarian Revisionists (James J. Martin, Murray N. Rothbard, Roy Childs, Jeffrey Rogers Hummel, et al.).

You may have noticed that in referring to the New History/Progressive History movement, I mentioned only Barnes and Beard. That's because these are the only World War I revisionists that Ruggenbach explicitly identifies as coming out of that movement. Ruggenbach mentions some (but not all) other World War I revisionists--Sidney Fay, Charles Tansill, C. Hartley Grattan, and Walter Millis. But he never explicitly identifies them as members of the New History/Progressive History movement. And, focusing exclusively on American revisionism, he never mentions any of the various non-American World War I revisionists. It appears to me that the World War I revisionist movement and the New History/Progressive History movement might have been two distinct and separate movements which happened to overlap to a small extent in the persons of Barnes and Beard. (On pages 176-177, Ruggenbach discusses David Muzzey, author of the textbook, *An American History*. A member of the New History movement, according to Ruggenbach, Muzzey does not seem to have been a World War I revisionist.)

There are a number of American revisionists who Ruggenbach does not mention, including David Hoggan, who, among other things, wrote *The Myth of the New History*, which included a critique of the New History movement from which Barnes and Beard emerged. But if Ruggenbach had been more "inclusive" in his study of American revisionists, he might not have been able to say, as he does, "...all the historical revisionists discussed in this book were on the Left, not the Right." (To be fair, Ruggenbach does not actually claim that the three movements he chooses to highlight comprise *all* of American revisionism.)

The American Revolution and the Founding Fathers, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II, and the Cold War are some of the topics dealt with by Ruggenbach. For example, there are discussions of George Washington's ability as a general, the violation of the individual rights of Loyalists by revolutionaries, Abraham Lincoln's racism and tyranny, the imperialist takeover of the Philippines, and the massive violation of civil liberties during World War I. Franklin Roosevelt's maneuvering the Japanese into firing the first shot, to pave the way for U.S. entry into World War II, and Truman's atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to intimidate Stalin rather than to save American lives are some of the revisionist points made by the writers Ruggenbach cites.

But, as I've said, Ruggenbach's treatment of revisionism is not exhaustive. Thus, for example, his treatment of World War II is quite Japanocentric. There are sections on Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the incarceration of the Japanese in the U.S. during the war. But there is next to nothing about the origins of the war in Europe, except, perhaps, for a quotation from Barnes about the unfairness of the Versailles Treaty making a renewal of hostilities almost inevitable. And there is no debunking of the Hitler Menace, a scarecrow that still seems to frighten conventional historians. (By "the Hitler Menace," I mean the imminent and major threat to the U.S. alleged by FDR and other warmongers.) Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, co-authors of *Patriot's History of the United States*, are discussed by Ruggenbach on pages 199-202. Although he quotes some of their references to "the threat posed by Hitler," neither there, nor elsewhere in the book, does Ruggenbach criticize the assumption contained in those quotations.

Prospective readers of this book should also realize that the war revisionism presented by Rignenbach does not extend beyond the Cold War, except for a few brief remarks. There is almost nothing here about the post-Cold-War wars of George H. W. Bush, William Jefferson Clinton, or George W. Bush (although there is an epigraph quoting the last of these three). There's almost nothing here about 9/11, except a brief critical comment on restrictions on civil liberties following 9/11, quoted from libertarian Doug Bandow. There's almost nothing about "the War on Terrorism," except a brief critical reference to George W. Bush's "nation-building," quoted from journalist Stephen Greenhut. There's nothing at all about neoconservative efforts to lie the U.S. into wars with all of Israel's enemies. All of these would seem to be fertile fields for revisionism, though it might seem difficult, at this point, to separate sound revisionist history from crackpot conspiracy theories.

Those who are in the habit of reading atrocity stories (like Hogo de Bergerac, a character in the novel *Snow White*, by Donald Barthelme, which was brought to my attention many years ago by Jeff Rignenbach) might be disappointed by Rignenbach's omission of any discussion of wartime atrocities, real or imagined, except for the atomizing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Those who are addicted to Holocaust revisionism will get no satisfaction for that craving here.

One interesting aspect of Rignenbach's discussion of these three revisionist movements is that he points out interconnections between some of the members of these different movements. I was already aware of some of this information, having been interested in both libertarianism and revisionism since 1969. However, I was not aware that Charles Beard was an important influence on William Appleman Williams.

Speaking of Williams, reading his books, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* and especially *The Contours of American History*, was an eye-opening experience for me many years ago. Contrary to the myth accepted by some revisionists, American imperialism did not begin in 1898 or 1917. Right from the start, some of the Founders were already envisioning an American Empire. Attempts were made to conquer Canada during both the Revolution and the War of 1812. (The first of these attempts is mentioned by Rignenbach in his discussion of Kenneth Roberts' novel *Arundel*.) Amazingly enough, at one time Jefferson imagined the fledgling U. S. as eventually populating and taking over all of both North and South America. And shortly before the public announcement of the Monroe Doctrine, Jefferson told Monroe that he had long looked on Cuba as a very desirable acquisition for the United States. (Gore Vidal's *Burr* alludes to this in a slightly inaccurate way.) The idea of "Manifest Destiny" was publicized in the 1840s, followed shortly thereafter by the Mexican War, by which the U. S. took *mucho* territory from Mexico.

As I've indicated, Rignenbach's treatment of some standard revisionist topics is somewhat sketchy. On the other hand, he does devote several pages to the late James J. Martin, largely based on interviews he did with Martin. Martin was the author of *Men Against the State*, a study of 19th-century American individualist anarchists, and of various works of revisionist history, including *American Liberalism and World Politics, 1931-1941*, *Revisionist Viewpoints*, and *The Saga of Hog Island and other Essays in Inconvenient History*. (Inconvenient history? Hmm. Sounds familiar.)

I learned a lot about Martin's personal history and the development of his interest and involvement in revisionism from reading Rignenbach's sections about him. For example, Rignenbach tells the story of how Martin first came into contact with Harry Elmer Barnes, a story I hadn't read before. And Rignenbach discusses Martin's early days as a historian when he discovered various stories ignored by

other historians. To cite one example out of several, Riggenbach quotes Martin regarding the first Korean War:

"It wasn't in 1950. It was in June 1871. The Far East American fleet of five ships landed four hundred Marines, who tackled a whole bunch of Koreans in a fortress at the mouth of the Han River and killed six hundred of them in one day. There was a lot of big battles that didn't have six hundred in them. Yet I had never heard a word about it."

What I wonder, but which Martin, as quoted by Riggenbach doesn't explain, is why did that battle occur?

(As I've already indicated, there's nothing in this book about Holocaust revisionism, and that is true even in Riggenbach's sections on Martin, despite Martin's support for Holocaust revisionism. However, according to what I've heard through the libertarian grapevine, because of Martin's support for Holocaust revisionism and his association with the Institute for Historical Review (IHR), Riggenbach has been criticized for favorably discussing him by a former associate of Ayn Rand, Barbara Branden, who is a Holocaust true believer and a fanatical Zionist.)

Riggenbach has a long chapter (Chapter Five) titled, "The Politics of the American Revisionists," which includes his revisionist history of American politics from a libertarian or "classical liberal" perspective.

Following Murray Rothbard's lead, Riggenbach sees the original liberals as devotees of individual liberty, laissez-faire, separation of church and state, and international peace. And it was the Democrats, says Rothbard, who were the liberal party during the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, conservative supporters of centralized federal power, protective tariffs, and other subsidies for business, first formed the Federalist party, later the Whig party, and finally the Republican party. However, the Democratic party has become increasingly conservative, in the original meaning of "conservative." Thus, for example, Riggenbach quotes the avowed liberal John T. Flynn's opinion that the New Deal was "a form of conservatism dressed up as liberalism."

I wonder what Sean Hannity will make of Riggenbach's view that both the Republican and Democratic parties are now conservative parties. In any case, I suppose that Hannity will not call Riggenbach "a great American."

Before moving on to other aspects of Riggenbach's Chapter Five, I'd like to point out that insofar as 19th-century Democrats were devotees of individual liberty, they were in many cases devotees of individual liberty only for individuals who were White. Thus, Andrew Jackson, whose "genocidal" treatment of American Indians is mentioned by Riggenbach, was a Democrat. And it was Democrats much more so than members of other parties who were defenders of the institution of Black slavery. Furthermore, 19th-century Democrats were by no means consistent supporters of international peace. It was mainly Democrats, not Federalists, who were the warhawks of the War of 1812. And the Mexican War was generally supported by Democrats and generally opposed by Whigs.

One interesting irony of Chapter Five is that Riggenbach, sticking with Rothbard's definition of the original meaning of "liberal," criticizes Rothbard and others for having used the term "the Old Right" to refer to various opponents of FDR's statism and warmongering, people such as John T. Flynn, H. L. Mencken, Albert Jay Nock, Garet Garrett, Isabel Paterson, and Rose Wilder Lane. These people weren't on the Right, says Riggenbach, they were on the Left. There might be something to this. As I've

mentioned, John T. Flynn *did* call himself a "liberal." On the other hand, I recall that Mencken told somebody--Sinclair Lewis perhaps--that the politics of his *American Mercury* would be Tory, but civilized Tory. (And he said he had no love for the Republican bounders then in power, or something to that effect.) If Mencken was on the Left, apparently he didn't realize it.

Section VIII of Chapter Five is titled "The Reagan Fraud--And Beyond." Here Riggerbach debunks Ronald Reagan's image as a champion of limited government, individual rights, and free enterprise, relying to a large extent on Murray Rothbard's "The Two Faces of Ronald Reagan," "The Reagan Phenomenon," and "The Myths of Reaganomics." For example, he quotes Rothbard on Reagan's record on taxes as governor of California: "He started with a bang by increasing state taxes nearly \$1 billion in his first year in office--the biggest tax increase in California history."

Offhand, I don't know if Rothbard is 100% accurate about this. But as a former California resident who, in 1966, supported Reagan's quest for the governorship, I do remember that, shortly after taking office in 1967, Reagan announced that he had been informed by a member of the outgoing Democratic administration of Pat Brown that the state government was facing a large budget deficit. Taxes were increased, the budget was eventually balanced, and the state government began to accumulate surpluses. As late as 1975, when interviewed by *Reason* magazine, Reagan was reasonably accurate in describing what had happened--taxes had been increased to deal with a deficit. But by 1980, Reagan had apparently bought into supply-side economic theory (which, as far as I can tell, is just a theory), and he began to revise history in a blatantly counterfactual way. Running for President that year, he promised to cut taxes, increase military spending, and balance the budget. And he said he knew he could do all that because he'd already done it as governor of California. Was Reagan already afflicted with Alzheimer's in 1980?

Further regarding Reagan, Riggerbach quotes Timothy Noah: "The deficit, which stood at \$74 billion in Carter's final year, ballooned to \$155 billion in Reagan's final year. In the words of Vice President Dick Cheney, 'Reagan taught us deficits don't matter.'"

Democrat Alan Colmes recently (September 2009) asked an apparently Republican caller to his radio talk show about the cost of the Iraq War started by Republican president George W. Bush. The caller's response was: "My taxes didn't go up because of the war in Iraq." Of course, if his taxes didn't go up, it was because the government's deficit spending *did* go up. Like Reagan in the 1980s, Bush II set new records for deficit spending. But deficits don't matter--except when they can be blamed on the Democrats.

Riggerbach's critique of Reagan, be it noted, concentrates almost exclusively on domestic issues, not foreign policy. So various potentially very interesting topics are not mentioned-- U.S. government support in the 1980s for the *Mujaheddin*, the Muslim holy warriors miscalled "freedom fighters," in Afghanistan; U.S. government support in the 1980s for the Bloodstained Butcher of Baghdad; the Iran-Contra hoedown; U. S. military involvement in Lebanon following Israel's invasion of 1982; and the liberation of Grenada, Ronald Reagan's finest hour (and I mean that *literally*).

Having said that, I'll add that there is much more to Riggerbach's Chapter Five than the things I've touched on in these remarks.

One aspect of Ruggenbach's book I haven't yet mentioned is his examination of the "history wars," or conflicts over the contents of American history textbooks. He introduces this topic in his Preface, then discusses it in more detail in his final chapter. He mentions various groups that have tried to control the contents of such textbooks, including the GAR (the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization of Union veterans of the Civil War), the VFW, the NAACP, and the ADL.

Regarding these "history wars," Ruggenbach writes:

"Until very recently, however, the range of conflict over American history textbooks was narrow indeed. All sides tacitly agreed that the story of the United States was the triumphant tale of a people fervently devoted to peace, prosperity, and individual liberty, a people left utterly untempted by the opportunities of the kind that had led so many other nations down the ignoble road of empire; a people who went to war only as a last resort and only when both individual liberty and Western Civilization itself were imperiled and at stake."

This is a version of the view that has been labeled "American Exceptionalism."

But, says Ruggenbach, within the last 30 years the situation has radically changed. There are a number of writers who now present an "...alternative vision of America's past as a series of betrayals by political leaders of all major parties...." In this regard, Ruggenbach pays much attention to Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, first published in 1980, and which has become an influential college-level textbook. Zinn's book, says Ruggenbach, "...conveys much the same vision of American diplomatic history that one finds in Gore Vidal's American Chronicle novels and the works of the revisionist historians." And Zinn now has competitors whose American history books are likewise NOT examples of "the traditional, America-as-pure-and-virtuous-beacon-of-liberty-prosperity-and-peace version of our past."

But here I'd like to point out that the "history wars," as important as they are, might not be quite as important as Ruggenbach seems to think. Ruggenbach writes, "If, as seems to be the case, these textbooks encompass one hundred percent of the information that most high school and college graduates in this country will ever encounter on the subject of American history, the American history wars would appear to be well worth fighting." But it seems obvious to me that, in fact, most high school and college graduates in this country will get some, maybe much, information about American history from TV and the movies.

Ruggenbach himself mentions that some of Kenneth Roberts' historical novels were made into movies (*Northwest Passage*, *Captain Caution*, and *Lydia Bailey*). And he says that Gore Vidal's revisionist novel, *Lincoln*, was adapted as a made-for-TV movie in 1988. Over the decades, there've been a huge number of other movies dealing with American history.

How influential are movies and TV shows in forming Americans' views of American history? And how does that influence compare with that of history textbooks? I don't know. It should be noted, though, that there have been "history wars" of a sort over some movies, including *The Birth of a Nation*, *Tailgunner Joe* (about Joseph McCarthy), *Roots*, Oliver Stone's *JFK*, Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and *The Reagans*.

Near the end of the book, Ruggenbach writes:

"...thanks to the true liberals of our past and present, and thanks to the decadence of our culture--which is to say, thanks to the steady decline of authority in our culture--since the late 1960s, that marketplace of ideas is now fairly roiling with dozens of competing American histories reflecting dozens of political views and senses of life. As readers, we get to pick and choose among them, and judge for ourselves. This is the very best situation we could possibly expect, and we should be happy about it."

Or, as Doctor Pangloss, in Voltaire's *Candide*, put it, "All is for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds." But as Coth, in Cabell's *The Silver Stallion*, said, "The optimist says this is the best of all possible worlds, and the pessimist fears that the optimist is correct."

There are other issues raised by Riggerbach in this book, such as the difficulties involved in establishing historical facts, and whether or not objectivity is possible in writing history. And there is more that I could say about the book. But life is short and time is fleeting, so I'll wrap this up.

I've already said Riggerbach's book is interesting and informative. I'll just add that it's also thought-provoking, although, as may be obvious, some of the thoughts it has provoked in me are skeptical thoughts.

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